

BRITISH INTELLECTUALS IN THE WELFARE STATE

How the New Climate Affects Science and Culture

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IT IS well to remember that the intellectual life of a country such as Britain is a whole composed of many parts. Someone like myself tends to judge the position of British intellectuals by that of the creative writers. Yet my one evening's visit to the Festival of Britain—which was, among other things, the outstanding intellectual event of 1951 in England—made clear to me that scientists, architects, musicians, and artists, even more than the writers, form today our intellectual life. And it goes without saying that the intellectual life itself takes its character from the larger social framework. There has been a transformation in the whole, and the result is a general displacement of every part. Some parts have benefited, others have suffered. The social changes that affect the writer also affect the doctor, though differently.

All these changes in England tend to be attributed to socialism, yet perhaps one of the most important things to grasp is that socialism has little to do with it. Britain has been living under a state of emergency, and it is really the emergency which has decided everything. A great deal of the legislation that is attributed to socialism was already de-

STEPHEN SPENDER reports here on the intellectual and cultural climate of England against a background of economic crisis and political uncertainty. How does the writer, and his colleagues in the various arts and sciences, fare in the Welfare State? The latest of Mr. Spender's numerous books, *World Within World*, an autobiographical volume, was published in this country earlier this year. His other books include *The Destructive Element*, *Forward from Liberalism*, *European Witness*, and several volumes of poetry. Mr. Spender was born in 1909 and attended University College, Oxford. His most recent contribution to COMMENTARY, aside from book reviews, was in the symposium "The Jewish Writer and the English Literary Tradition," in the September 1949 issue.

cided by the National Government of the war years. I doubt whether a different government—I write before the election—although it may arouse a good many passions, can really alter anything, so long as Britain continues to exist within an ever extending economic crisis.

Politicians can of course continue to fight about unreal issues, but the lack of alternatives, of a choice of action apart from just a choice between parties with different names, is one of the profoundest causes of unease in England today. A healthy body can choose; an unhealthy one has to take the medicines prescribed for it. Although Churchill at the one extreme, or Bevan at the other, might make a fearful *gaffe* and deliver a too light or too heavy dose, it is felt that on the whole they wouldn't, and that whatever government comes into power will do much the same things.

This lack of a real choice, in the way that there was once a profound difference of principle between left and right, has not destroyed politics, but it has taken the intellectual inspiration from politics: the intellectual no longer feels that society is a material which can be shaped into the image of a social idea that inspires him. Politics supplies less and less the matter for the intellectual's creative thought, but more clearly than ever it determines the situation in which he must operate, and while the excitement of regarding politics as a field for the exercise of a moral free will has disappeared, the bitterness of political conflicts has rather increased. Extremists who are not in power advocate unreal alternatives (like the cry of some conservatives for a "strong hand" in Persia, or the *New Statesman and Nation's* advocacy of a line independent of the United States) with a violence exacerbated by their sense of impotence.

THERE is a good deal of disagreement among the intellectuals as to the ultimate nature of the present crisis. I belong to a committee consisting of a few scientists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and writers, and one question that constantly comes up is whether there has been a decline in the values of our society. Some members of the committee approach these discussions on the assumption that things are tremendously wrong, and that we live in an era of apocalyptic disaster. The sociologists do not deny the existence of a crisis, but they deny strenuously that things are worse than they have frequently been before. They point out that the standard of living of the English workers is higher than it has ever been, that we are creating a society in which everyone is cared for, and that if we are threatened by seemingly overwhelming dangers, so have most societies been through all but the latter half of the 19th century, when "the West" felt comparatively secure.

The scientists, represented by the brilliant J. B. Bronowsky, author of a book on William Blake and now a research worker on the Coal Board, are not over-gloomy either, though they do not have the opaque optimism of the official Laborite intellectuals. I suppose that if you are a scientist today, all sorts of possibilities are open to you which are not revealed to other people. If you know, for example, that in the slag and waste of coal pits which no one has felt worth mining or which have been abandoned, there are gases which when they are tapped will provide more fuel power than all the coal in the mines that are used—if you know this and many other such facts, then the statistics about production which so discourage non-scientists only exist as a problem to be resolved by new discoveries. For the contemporary scientist the solution of poverty may lie in the exploitable energy of a grain of sand. So the attitude of many British scientists (exemplified above all by J. D. Bernal) is that, given the opportunity, they could transform the material conditions of English life. Hence, also, the temptation of some scientists to fall for Communism, which

seems to offer them the fullest power to work for the community.

ONE basic fact outweighs all others as a determinant of the intellectual life and the lives of intellectuals.

Britain is a country in circumstances terribly reduced by two wars. Its foreign investments were sold between 1939 and 1945, and its middle classes are almost ruined. A mild socialist revolution took place in 1945, and the policy which has been followed is the inevitable one of rationing goods and distributing benefits as evenly as possible. So the problem for the individual is how to fit himself into a society where individualism as such has strictly limited means and rewards. This hits everyone. If the writers complain, so do the thousands of young people—mostly workers—who emigrate to Canada each year because they find England to be a country where there is no opening for their "initiative."

Anyone living in England and frequenting the society of the people who are generally thought of as the "intellectuals"—namely the writers—is struck by their gloom. It is difficult to attach this depression to any particular spokesmen, for an intellectual depression can scarcely be said to have leaders; though George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (he is said to have given it this title because no one would have taken him seriously if he had called it *Nineteen Forty-eight*) blows like a posthumous breath of bitter disillusionment over the English literary scene.

The disappearance of Cyril Connolly's *Horizon* and of John Lehmann's *New Writing* (not to mention half a dozen other reviews) is symptomatic. Here, too, one is confronted by the complexity of the Intellectual Depression. Connolly's farewell editorial placed most of the blame for *Horizon's* demise on the public and his fellow writers. The fact is that *Horizon* could have carried on; it gave up the ghost in a fit which was a mixture of fatigue and pique. *New Writing* fell to the lack of interest of the publishers. In neither case can the public or the writers really be blamed. The circumstances which

have led to the disappearance of review after review can really perhaps be best summed up under the one word "tiredness."

It is remarkable that in literature, on the whole, the right has survived far better than the left. The writers who are still actively producing are T. S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Elizabeth Bowen—all writers of the right or center who never mixed in the left movement of the 30's. The mood of despondency is in fact decidedly a crisis of the left, and there are several reasons, personal and public, why this should be so.

The most important of these brings me back to the absence of political choice in England today. The leftist intellectuals, after their political representatives achieved power, experienced far more disillusionment than those of the right, who were able to take up the position of representing a nobler order of things than the decade dominated by Necessity which was called Socialism. The rightists could wash their hands of the political situation. The intellectuals of the left could not do so, but were forced either to indulge in the kind of carping criticism of their own party and government that characterizes the *New Statesman*, or else to attempt to enjoy the ascetic medicine with which socialism provided them.

At this point, the left-wing intellectuals were faced with a problem that no socialist writer in England had hitherto experienced: namely, the unpleasantness of having to live in a collectivized society. Here again the rightists were in a much stronger position, for they had never asked for such a society; although its advent did not make them happy, the spirit in which they accepted it did not become a problem of conscience to them.

One has to look back a bit to understand the discomfiture of the English leftist writers. England has a long tradition of writers who have preached socialism, including Ruskin, William Morris, Bernard Shaw, and H. G. Wells. It is perhaps only a coincidence that these were all men with a considerable passion for the goods of the world. To some ex-

tent this passion gave them bad consciences; but it is easier for a socialist writer to reconcile his conscience to having money than to accept with good grace its being taken away. In a socialist society, it was felt, everyone would have what he needed, and the extraordinary talents of a Wells or a Shaw would probably be rewarded even more than they were in the bourgeois society. (Shaw, who preached egalitarianism for everyone else, wanted to be a millionaire, showed extraordinary resistance to taxation when it hit him personally, and was made miserable in his old age by an obsessive idea that the government was ruining him; indeed, perhaps Shaw was a Communist rather than a socialist because he realized that the Communists were far more likely than the socialists to leave him his fortune.) British socialism does not work like this. And the writers are a particularly hard-hit section of society, because they are scarcely recognized as deserving the tax-free expense accounts which ease the life of a businessman. It is crude to say so, but I am convinced that the absence of hard cash is one of the reasons for the disillusionment of the writers with socialism. Here again the rightists score: having never asked for egalitarianism, they do not have bad consciences when they find that they resent it.

THE intellectuals are drawn into the emergency organization of British life either because it needs them or because it is felt that they need it. Thus, on the one hand, there are the scientists employed by the government for atomic research or on the Coal Board; on the other, there are artists who are given Arts Council grants. The scientist is fulfilling a function of immediate necessity, the artist is a secondary kind of necessity—entertainment, if not charity.

For an architect, there is practically no scope for domestic building, since houses in the Welfare State are strictly utilitarian. There is, however, within the very restricted means allowed, a great deal of planning. Part of the zest of the buildings for the Festival was due to their being a kind of architect's holiday; Ralph Tubbs (who designed

the Dome of Discovery) and a few others were at last allowed to do what they wanted with their gifts, and they were not cramped by the usual restrictions.

For painters, the private purchaser has almost disappeared and their most sought-after market now exists in the committees of the Arts Council who choose paintings for exhibitions. These committees have maintained a remarkably high standard of judgment. All the same, they can hardly be supposed to have the passionate taste which is that of the private collector. They are likely to choose works that seem most characteristic of a particular artist or of a phase of his development—"representative" works. One distinguished painter who has had many works chosen remarked to me that in the course of several years the committee has nearly always chosen what he considered his "average" paintings and almost never his best ones.

Music has probably benefited more than any other art from this organization of intellectual life, for music has existed for a concert public for two hundred years now, anyway. Yet here one notices a disadvantage in the organization of the arts: the boosting of everything English. In both painting and music there seems to have been an unconscious conspiracy resulting from the reaction of artists themselves against foreign influences and the efforts of cultural organizations to boost their wares. Instead of importing Picasso and Stravinsky, we now export Henry Moore ("the world's greatest sculptor") and Benjamin Britten. Perhaps these two very distinguished artists do not suffer from being told that they are the greatest of their kind that the world has to show, but there is no doubt that a maddening complacency with British artistic products has settled down on the younger English painters and composers.

BENEATH the personal problems of writers who are heavily taxed in a society where the book trade is already hard hit by economic shortages, there lurk much deeper problems. In modern society the writer has been a comparatively privileged person, a kind of professional amateur, a man whose

work is created out of a life which—compared with other lives—is one long holiday. The anarchist and socialist writers who scorned the bourgeoisie were its spoiled children, highly paid to deliver their insults. The freedom of England was, more than in any other country in the world, the freedom of the middle classes; and whatever his political views, no writer who could afford not to do so chose to live in a working-class environment. The workers in the plays of Bernard Shaw or the novels of H. G. Wells are just as much buffoons as the clowns in Shakespeare; and if they rise above buffoonery, it is because they move into the revolutionary section of the middle class.

English individualism itself is essentially a middle-class affair, and with the decline of the middle classes that individualism appears to be threatened. To all intents and purposes there is no working-class or peasant culture in England. Nothing illustrates this better than the life of D. H. Lawrence, the one great proletarian writer of this century who, as distinct from those middle-class writers who practiced a theoretical socialism, really sprang from the people. The key to Lawrence's philosophy is an absolute hatred for the ugliness of the mining villages near Nottingham, where he was born. Lawrence retained throughout his life a sympathy for the miners, as people—they are the gamekeepers and workers who seduce his titled ladies. But what he could not stomach was the environment from which these people arose; the seduction of a Lady Chatterley by a gamekeeper symbolized the rejection by the individual worker of his past surroundings. Lawrence retained a worker's contempt for the bourgeois, but more than anything he hated the idea of the proletarianization of England, which he regarded as a kind of diabolic possession in which the last stage would be worse than the first.

The English leftist writers wanted socialism for other people, and imagined themselves existing independently as artists within a socialist society. If socialism was their philosophy for others, the closer and more intimate philosophy according to which they

lived had, as its two main components, the sanctity of personal relationships and a small independent income. These goals seemed so modest that they did not imagine them to conflict with a socialist society. "Two Cheers for Democracy," the title of an essay by E. M. Forster, expresses their attitude towards society, and *A Room of One's Own*, by Virginia Woolf (with its variant, combining Forster and Virginia Woolf: "A Womb with a View," by Cyril Connolly) expressed their inmost faith. If Marxism was the text of their social creed, their private philosophy was expressed by G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*, with its insistence on the supreme values of aesthetic experience and personal relationships. Even on the left, the best talents of the century have been perfectionist and personal in the first place and social and cooperative only in the second place.

And always there was the belief that the individualist position could be reconciled with the socialist one, that the masses would be brought up to the level of the intellectuals, not the intellectuals confined within the life of the masses. Nor, in fact, have the individualists been proletarianized, although a general leveling down of the rich and the improvement of the conditions of living of the poor has led to a kind of flooding of the towns by rather joyless-looking workers in search of pleasure. The intellectuals have been officialized rather than proletarianized, seeking their livings on the BBC or in the British Council or some other kind of official work.

THE idea that individualism could and must be fused with socialism seems to me the right one, and yet in England today, among the writers, it seems to have very little weight. It is the kind of "liberal" solution which people reject all too easily nowadays. The younger writers have reacted away from social thinking altogether into a personalism or a neo-romanticism which echoes Keats's boast that he had never written a line tainted with public thought. The very abstract anarchism of Herbert Read seems to attract a good many, and the fiercely anti-American

anarchist-pacifism of the brilliant writer and physician Alex Comfort is an extreme form of a kind of political thinking that rejects existing political realities altogether. In a recently published letter in the *New Statesman*, Alex Comfort declares that "since 1940 the policies in which we are involved have become, almost imperceptibly unless one was watching for the change, policies whose entire real motivation is unconscious." According to him, America's attitude to Russia can only be explained in terms of "psycho-pathology, not politics." This does not mean, however, that he favors Russia, which he regards also as being, though to perhaps a lesser degree, a prey of "unconscious forces." Dr. Comfort wishes Britain to dissociate itself from the "mental patients playing upon the endemic neurosis of a sick nation" who are the framers of American policy. I suspect that a good many of the younger intellectuals would agree with his diagnosis, or at all events with his bitter attitude towards public policy, though they would probably not follow him to his conclusions, which would seem to them too directly "political."

All this sounds bad, but it may signify little more than that intellectuals who had put too much trust in social philosophies are now either withdrawing from them, or trying to take up some new position. The mistake of the left has been always to put too much faith in systems—which, however good and just they may be, remain after all external *things*—and not to emphasize sufficiently the importance of an interior life that is independent of things. A mechanically good society like the Welfare State does not make people morally self-sufficient. Indeed, it may have the result that those people who have advocated it without leading lives that can ever more than indirectly contribute to it are at a loss when it is accomplished. Before socialism came into being, the moral purpose of their lives was to promote it; but when it has been established they are left without a *raison d'être*: and that is what has happened to many of the English leftist writers.

Despite the fact that some of the older

writers in England are at the height of their powers, one has the impression that literature is going through a period which is a kind of gap. Intellectually and morally the older writers are living on their capital. The younger ones can hardly draw on the patrimony of the Sitwells, or on T. S. Eliot's sense of a continuous tradition. One has the impression of a dearth of young talent, and the personalism, apocalypticism, neo-romanticism, etc., of the younger poets has come to very little or nothing. The poets whom it is most possible to respect are those like Vernon Watkins and Norman Nicholson who have withdrawn to the country and who produce admittedly minor work reminiscent of the Georgian poets, but with a strength of technique learned during the past thirty years.

If England were any other country, one would say that what we are waiting for is a talent that would express the emergent confidence of the working class with the same strength as the early Wells expressed the point of view of the self-educated little man half a century ago. If such a writer were to arise one would expect him to come from Scotland or Wales—at all events from some area where there were the remnants of a local tradition. But the culture of England is so persistently middle-class that it is difficult to imagine any such writer not being absorbed into this group. After all, given luck, what is most likely to happen in England is that the children of the workers of today will be absorbed into the middle class, just as the political leaders, and the D. H. Lawrences and the Dylan Thomases, have been. A new middle-class England strengthened by the blood of the workers will eventually arise, I believe. But it will take thirty years.

A COMPLETE picture of English intellectual life today would, I think, be inconclu-

sive, but its main features would be something as follows: the social planners, with their heads buried in the sand of astronomical statistics, well and happy, thank you; the scientists, troubled by a sense of social responsibility awakened in them by the atom bomb, renouncing the 19th-century attitude that science means complete detachment from everything but the facts, but enthusiastically responding to the challenge to produce miracles that would solve seemingly overwhelming material problems; the philosophers, occupied in an amusing analysis of language which has the result of destroying the whole basis of metaphysical thought and at the same time making the construction of any future philosophy logically impossible; the writers divided into several groups: (a) the older writers reincarnating the glories of a past civilization; (b) the leftist writers finding the social problem solved by the perpetual improvisations of a Necessity needing no assistance from them; (c) the young writers, able neither to draw on the capital of the old ones nor to adopt the worn attitudes of the leftist ones, absorbed in a desperate search for a personal attitude towards events threatening to destroy human personality.

Serious literature might seem *de trop* in the Welfare State (or the State of Necessity), did not there hover over us in the threatening atmosphere a warning whose presence is the one thing the older writers, the leftist writers, and the younger writers are all aware of. This is the nemesis predicted in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, where men are completely dominated by the needs of a society perpetually dividing and subdividing into warring groups, or in the idea expressed in Wells's strange last book, *Mind at the End of Its Tether*: that the whole purpose of progressive movements has failed, and that something strange has happened in the world which makes events no longer predictable.